

# God Cares for Jacob

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We continue our look at the book of Genesis this summer by following the exploits of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. Last week we left off with Jacob leaving his brother and parents in order to find a wife from his mother's relatives. That was the excuse for his leaving, but in reality he was running away from Esau. Jacob had "bought" the birthright from his brother for a bowl of stew, and then tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing by pretending to be Esau. Now he is running away from a brother who wants to kill him.

So he sets out on his way to find his mother's family, a journey of about 500 miles. **He stopped** for the night, laid his head on a rock, and had a dream in which he saw a stairway to heaven. In this dream, God appeared and repeated the promise that had been made to Abraham and Isaac:

***Genesis 28:13-15 "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."***

God would use Jacob to bring His promise to the world. When Jacob woke up, he realized that an awesome thing had happened to him here. He called that place the house of God. Literally. He named it "**Bethel**" which means "house of God." Then Jacob made a vow to God.

***Genesis 28:20-22 "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."***

That all sounds well and good, but as the story plays out, we see a pattern emerge that still rings true today: **God was faithful to His promise and Jacob was not faithful to his.** Does that sound familiar? Isn't that what happens in our lives? We see God's goodness but fail to live the lives we have pledged to live as His children! God keeps His promises, we don't keep ours.

Getting back to our story, we see that God guides Jacob to Laban, his uncle, where he is welcomed with open arms. Jacob falls for Rachel, Laban's younger daughter, and wants to marry her. He agrees to work for his uncle for seven years so that he can have Rachel as his wife. Here's how the story unfolds.

*Genesis 29:20-30 So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her." So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her. And Laban gave his servant girl Zilpah to his daughter as her maidservant. When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?" Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work." And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant girl Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maidservant. Jacob lay with Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.*

The one who had deceived and tricked others was himself deceived. It is worth pointing out that at this point, there was no written law against polygamy, but **Jacob** had to have wondered about the wisdom of having two wives and two maidservants, all of whom bore him children. The following chapters tell of the unhappy home life that resulted from the jealousy and competition among these women. Yet God is still at work through this in spite of the sinfulness of this family. Jacob has 12 sons and a daughter through these women. God's promise of many descendants is starting to be fulfilled.

Jacob remained in Laban's household for 20 years. During this time, in spite of some less than scrupulous dealings with his father-in-law, **Jacob prospers**. God continues to bless Jacob, providing him with more than enough food to eat and clothes to wear, which was the second thing Jacob had requested in his vow we heard earlier.

And that brings us to the third thing Jacob had asked for: **a safe return** to his father's house. At the end of those 20 years, he begins his journey home. He dreaded having to face Esau, who had threatened to kill him. He asked God to help him, and what follows is an encounter between God and Jacob at the river Jabbok that is bizarre and puzzling. (Gen 32:22-31) Jacob wrestles with God all night, and God changes his name to "**Israel**" which means "struggles with God." That is why his descendants are known as the "children of Israel," which is a descriptive name. As a nation, they would continue to struggle and go against God, just as we do in our daily lives.

Chapters 32 and 33 also describe how Jacob was reconciled to his brother Esau. He sent his flocks and family ahead and offered a peace offering to his brother. But God had already softened Esau's heart.

***Genesis 33:4 But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.***

God brought Jacob back safely. Unfortunately, Jacob seems to forget all about the promise he had made to God. While God had met all the conditions Jacob set – a safe journey to find his mother’s family, food and clothing, and a safe return – Jacob does not return to Bethel to worship the Lord, nor does he give him the tenth of his wealth that he had promised. Instead, he buys some land near Shechem, far north of Bethel, and builds a different altar there.

Jacob’s failure to keep his promise leads to nothing but trouble for him and his family. The next chapter (34) is filled with more unhappy events: his daughter is raped, then his sons retaliate and make his family outcasts among the people living around them. In chapter 35, God has to remind Jacob of his promise to return to Bethel, which he finally does. At that point, God reminds Jacob of His faithfulness and promises even more blessings to Jacob:

***Genesis 35:10-12 God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel. And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.”***

There is a contrast in all that we have been looking at today between the faithfulness of God and the unfaithfulness of Jacob.

- God acts with integrity. Jacob’s behavior is less that stellar.
- God not only keeps his promises, but fulfills all the conditions Jacob imposed in his vow. Yet Jacob fails to keep his promise to return to Bethel until God reminds him to do so.
- God goes above and beyond what is necessary; Jacob constantly falls short.

One of the things we should learn from all of this is that God’s favor in neither earned or merited by us. It is His gift to us that comes from His love. God initiates the relationship with Jacob, not the other way around. **God remains faithful throughout, even when Jacob does not.**

This is good news for us because God deals with us in the same way. You and I are as undeserving of God’s favor as Jacob was. We are constantly going against what He would have us do. We are liars, deceivers and cheaters who are constantly struggling against God. We think we know best and go against what He has commanded in His Word. We make promises to God that we don’t keep. We are constantly falling short. But the Good News is that God has initiated

a relationship with us. He has reached out to us in the person of His Son, the promised descendant of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. He has shown us unconditional love in spite of our many failings.

In today's message, we heard how Jacob and Esau were reconciled. But an even greater reconciliation took place through Jesus.

***Colossians 1:19-22 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—***

Note that this is God's doing, not ours. He provided a Savior for all people, letting Him take our punishment. His blood shed on the cross covers all sins and gives forgiveness and life everlasting. All who put their faith in Him are seen as holy, without blemish and free from accusation. God is faithful to His promise.

We have two more messages in this series. They have to do with the children of Israel, and how God used one of them in particular, Joseph, to preserve his family. I would encourage you to read Genesis 37 – 50 this week to prepare for these messages. And as you do, remember the theme of how our **God remains faithful to His promises** even when we do not.